

# COLORADO

## Gunnison Field Office

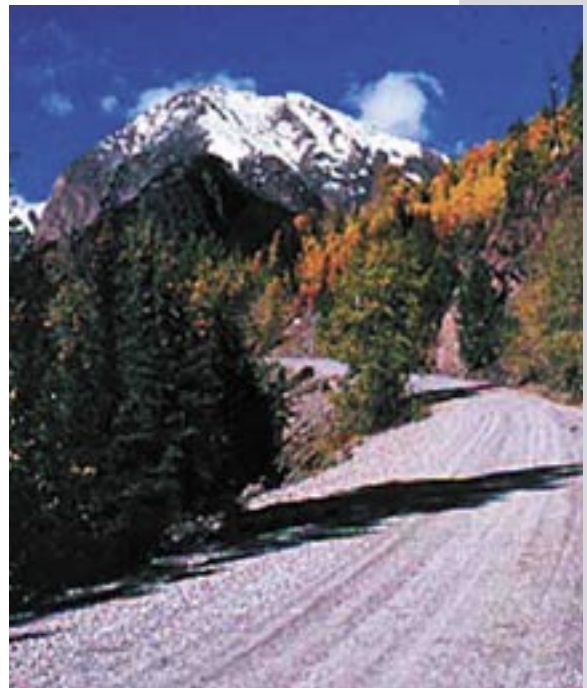


February 2005

## Welcome to BLM Colorado's Gunnison Field Office Area

**I**f you are looking for a place to visit with a lot of unique ways to enjoy Colorado's public lands, have we got a place for you! Please join us as we visit the beautiful upper valleys of the Gunnison River managed by the BLM's Gunnison Field Office. The 600,000 acres cared for by the BLM includes some of the best public lands the state has to offer. This is Colorado – pure and simple.

Outdoor recreation is one of our specialties and we have opportunities for just about every taste. If you like fishing, try the public stretches of the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River north of Lake City. If you like to mountain bike, check out the trails at Hartman Rocks just southwest of Gunnison. If you are looking for a backpacking trip, to lakes high in the mountains, try the Powderhorn Wilderness area about 30 miles southwest of Gunnison. If a day hike up a 14,000 ft. peak suits your taste, we have three to choose from in the San Juan Mountains west of Lake City. If scenic driving appeals to you, the three Scenic Byways that cross this area (West Elk Loop, Silver Thread and Alpine Loop) might be the places for you. If you do your touring on a snowmobile, you will love the well groomed trail system south of Lake City. Hunting, camping, rafting, kayaking, cross country skiing, 4-wheel driving, ATV riding, exploring historical sites, rock climbing and much more are also available to our visitors. There is so much to do we can't tell you all about it here, so we are going to focus on one of the unique features of the Gunnison Basin just right for a road trip - The Alpine Loop Scenic Byway.



The Alpine Loop, located between the small scenic towns of Lake City, Silverton and Ouray, was one of the first Scenic Byways designated in Colorado. The loop lies within the Alpine Triangle Recreation Area and is managed by the BLM Gunnison Field Office in cooperation with the Forest Service, the San Juan Public Lands Center, and the cities and towns in the area. Approximately 65% of the Lands on the loop are BLM lands.



The route was established in the late 1800s as a system of wagon roads to allow miners to access the mineral rich San Juan Mountains. It was primarily silver that attracted these hardy pioneers, but when the country went off the silver standard and the silver market crashed in 1892 most of the mines closed down. Miners moved on to the next boom town but left behind a variety of buildings, mining structures and ghost towns as a reminder of their brief stay. Today, these old wagon roads provide a path for visitors to enjoy some of the most spectacular scenery and recreation opportunities in Colorado. But this isn't your typical Byway. Rather than cruising on smooth pavement, this Byway is 65 miles of gravel and dirt road which is accessible for 2-wheel-drive vehicles in some parts, but requires a 4-wheel drive to cross Cinnamon and Engineer Passes (both over 12,600 ft. high). You have to drive slowly, but that just gives you more of a chance to see the scenery. If you can't come see for yourself, you can still enjoy the magic of our BLM Colorado public lands through our virtual road trip along the Alpine Loop.

### **Virtual Road Trip Along the Alpine Loop**

If you start off in Lake City you will find everything you need for your trip in this friendly little town. Check out the Visitor Center across from the Post Office for the latest maps and information. You can also pick up the Alpine Explorer our 24 page visitor's guide to the area. It includes a good map, points of interest along the way, history, safety tips and much more. Businesses provide gas, groceries, lodging, meals sporting goods and gifts. Also be sure to take the easy walking tour of historic buildings around town and visit the museum to learn a bit about the way life used to be in these parts.

Once in your vehicle, you head south on the pavement for a couple of miles then turn toward Lake San Cristobal and you are on the Alpine Loop. As you drive by this deep blue lake look off to the east and you will see the light colored soil and disrupted landform of the Slumgullion Slide. About 700 years ago this slide broke off Mesa Seco and ran four miles down the valley. When it stopped, it had dammed up the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River to form the second largest natural lake in Colorado. At the end of the lake you leave the pavement. The gravel road is in good condition though, so if you are in a 2-wheel-drive vehicle you can continue for another 13 miles or so. You will pass the Williams Creek Campground and the Mill Creek Campground then come to a fork. The right fork will take you climbing up along the Loop in the portion we call the Shelf Road. The road is narrow here so keep an eye out for pull outs to deal with oncoming traffic. The valley widens out in Burrows Park – the past site of several small mining camps. Trails to our tallest mountains take off from here.

As you continue on the road will get rougher, but if you are driving a 2-wheel-drive sedan, it is worth the bumpy ride in order to see American Basin – one of the most beautiful valleys in the San Juans. The best time to visit here is late July when the wildflowers above treeline explode in a rainbow of color. Photographers will want to spend several hours looking for just the right angle to capture the scenery. Mid September, when fall colors are changing is another great time to visit the Loop. From here the road gets steeper and rougher still and you will need to shift into 4 wheel drive to finish the climb up to Cinnamon Pass (12,600 ft.).



LAKE SAN CRISTOBAL AND THE CONTINENTAL DIVIDE



AMERICAN BASIN AND WILDFLOWERS IN LATE JULY





From the pass, you will drop into the Animas River valley and head for Animas Forks – one of the best preserved ghost towns in these mountains. Hard work by the BLM and volunteers from the San Juan County Historical Society has helped to stabilize some of the buildings so the public can continue to enjoy this step back in time. We need your help. Be careful poking around the old buildings, because time has taken its toll and they may not be safe. It is better to look in from the outside rather than entering the buildings. Take only photos and leave only footprints so other visitors can enjoy it for many years to come.

Back in your vehicle you must be getting hungry. Head down along the Animas River past the old townsites of Eureka and Howardsville to Silverton where you can grab some lunch and wet your whistle at a variety of restaurants. Take your camera down to the train depot and get a shot of the old steam locomotive, which carries visitors down to Durango on the narrow gauge railway.

Retracing your steps now, you will go past Animas Forks and climb gently then steeply up to Engineer Pass. At 12,800 ft. this is the highest pass along the Loop offering magnificent views in all directions. From there you drop down into the Henson Creek valley and glide past Rose's Cabin and Whitmore Falls to arrive at Capitol City. The founders of this mining camp had visions of grandeur that their tiny town would one day become the capitol of Colorado. We again worked with the Hinsdale County Historical Society to stabilize the old Post Office using similar materials and construction techniques to those used 120 years ago. From here, it is a nine mile cruise down to Lake City and a good night's sleep.

Now that you have the lay of the land, you can spend a few more days or weeks exploring the nooks and crannies in this spectacular landscape. The Visitor Center can steer you toward the hiking trails and the fishing spots and the many other special places on public land in this area. This is a fragile beauty, and we need your help to take care of it. Vehicles must stay on the designated roads to avoid damaging the meadows and alpine tundra. Be sure to pack all your trash out with you. There are some parcels of private land in this area so watch your maps and avoid trespassing. If you want to take the wildflowers home with you take a picture – don't pick the flowers. The picture will last longer and won't diminish the enjoyment of those who follow behind you. These are simple guidelines necessary to ensure that this remains one of Colorado's special places. You can check out the Recreation section of our web page at [www.co.blm.gov/gra/index.html](http://www.co.blm.gov/gra/index.html) for further information on visiting, enjoying and caring for your public lands in the Gunnison Valley. Happy Trails.



THE UPPER ANIMAS RIVER VALLEY



THE BAGLEY MILL NEAR THE GHOST TOWN OF ANIMAS FORKS



CAPITOL CITY POST OFFICE



AFTER STABILIZATION

For more information about the Gunnison Field Office or The Alpine Loop contact Arden Anderson at 970-642-4454.